

Liminoid invitations & liminoid acts

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‘Liminoid Invitations & Liminoid Acts: The role of ludic strategies & tropes in immersive and micro-performance dramaturgies’

Over the course of the paper I will consider the ways in which certain immersive and micro-performance practices employ ludic strategies within their dramaturgies. I will suggest that games, rules and tasks are a dominant trope of immersive and micro-performance, responsible for the construction of the performance environment, the performer’s presence/activity within that environment, and for the audience’s role within the performative frame. Given that games, rules and tasks are the strategies that constitute the performance environment, the performer’s role within this environment can be understood as a liminoid invitation. The liminoid invitations presented by ludic dramaturgies, generate the potential for their audiences to engage in liminoid acts. In what follows, I reflect on my current PaR project called Wish Box – a six hour durational, micro-performance experience, developed in collaboration with the Vertical Exchange Performance Collective - in order to illustrate the ontology of those ludic dramaturgies.

It is important to begin by offering some provisional distinctions that articulate the three dominant realms of immersive practices that are becoming increasingly prevalent in the landscape of experimental performance. Immersive theatre, immersive performance, and micro-performance each present strategies that are concerned with inclusion and participation through immersion in one way or another. There are many of forms of immersive practice that are emerging which demand that the discussion of immersion be broadened beyond the borders of just theatre. I want to suggest that they represent differing dramaturgies that approach immersion from

particular perspectives and specific strategies that have grown out of subtly different genealogies and contexts. However, the use of liminal space and the offer of a liminoid invitation are central features of all three fields of immersive practice with varying intentions and implications.

Liminal & Liminoid Distinctions

Liminal space and liminoid invitations are tropes that can be identified across all three dramaturgies of immersion thus drawing a distinction between the terms liminal and liminoid is a necessary task that will later be central to my own assertions. The term liminal, deriving from Latin 'limen', means a threshold or boundary, a corridor between two different places and is a term that is widely associated with discipline of anthropology. Turner posits that:

Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.

(Turner, 1967: 97)

And that

liminality represents the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions, outsiderhood refers to actions and relationships which do not flow from a recognized social status but originate outside it, while lowermost status refers to the lowest rung in a system of social stratification in which unequal rewards are accorded to functionally differentiated positions.

(Turner 1974:237)

The liminal space sits 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1986: 31) recognisable social space and the potential of new social space through the form and structure of a particular performance. It is a transitional space; referring to the familiar but also promising the possibility of the new. Liminality is a midpoint between a starting point and an ending point; a temporary state that ends when the initiate is reincorporated into the social structure.

Turner further suggests that the liminoid is forged out of 'play' scenarios that sit outside of societal rituals or practices and are therefore entered into as 'optional'. The liminoid invitations of immersive theatre, performance and micro-performance are an invitation to enter into *play* of one kind or another. A liminoid invitation engages the audience in 'shallow play'; Turner suggests that play is a: [l]iminoid mode, essentially interstitial, betwixt-and-between all standard taxonomic nodes, [...] neither ritual action, meditation ... nor just "having fun" (ibid). Instead, 'it has a good deal of ergotropic and agonistic aggressivity in its odd-jobbing, bricolage style' (ibid). Shallow play is, for Turner, inherently liminoid rather than liminal: the liminal is a compulsory processual feature of social relations; the liminoid is elective, spontaneous, ideological and predicated upon the principle of leisure.

Fields of Immersion

Immersive theatre is a term that has been popularised in recent years to identify a mode of practice that invites ambulating audiences into a fictive world of performance in such a way that their participation becomes a material part of the dramaturgy itself. Gareth White acknowledges this as central to the form which 'transform[s] the individual audience member's experience of theatre, without reference to the re-ordering of relationships and experiences outside of it' (White 2012:222). Typically, in the work of leading immersive companies, such as Third Rail Projects & Punchdrunk, the dramaturgy is constructed out of

expansive, multi-sensory environments that the audience are invited to explore on their own. Punchdrunk's work has in many ways become synonymous in the UK with the term 'immersive theatre'. In Andrew Eglington's words, their work 'offers an exhilarating live experience based on palpable interactions with a performance environment and its inhabitants, but always with implicit recognition of the authority of the performers (Eglington, 2010: 55)

Third Rail Projects hold a similar status to Punchdrunk in the immersive theatre scene in NYC; their work allows audiences intimate access to the interior of fictive worlds, where it 'carefully guides its guests through the experience with invisible paths laid out for each audience member' (Schaefer, 2015: 67). For White, '[i]mmersion implies access to the inside of the performance in some way' (White, 2012: 221). Immersive theatre 'often surrounds audience members, makes use of cleverly structured interiors and ingenious invitations for them to explore, addresses their bodily presence in the environment and its effect on sense-making, and teases them with the suggestion of further depths just possibly within reach' (White, 2012: 233). White also suggests that, immersive theatre 'addresses itself to these bodies in an unambiguous way by locating them within the performance space, in proximity to performers, and inviting them to move and interact' (White, 2012: 229). It would seem that immersive theatre invites its audiences to enter into the usually sealed-off liminal space of the fictive world of the 'play' with an explicit invitation to become a material part of the fictive world. The liminal space of the fictive world becomes the strategy that marshals the invitation to play; it is the site that enables and activates the game structures of immersive theatre.

Over the last decade there has been a turn towards immersion and participation within certain non-theatrical, cultural practices. If immersive theatre is an invitation to come and 'play' inside the fictive world of the play, then immersive performance is an invitation to come and 'play' with possible fictive worlds. It is generated out of games, rules, tasks or scenarios

that are only activated as performance once the audience take up the liminoid invitation to engage in play. The fictive liminal spaces of Punchdrunk's work, for example, already exist and are not reliant upon the audience's acceptance of the liminoid invitation to generate the performance. By contrast, the pregnant scenarios of immersive performance require the audience to bring it into being through the act of play; it does not and cannot exist without the committing of liminoid acts. The 'rules of engagement' form the structure of the work but these only become manifest as acts through the undertaking of the various games and tasks; the acts generate the actual performance itself. In other words, immersive performance employs play to generate the performance itself. Companies such as CoLab and Speakeasy Dollhouse employ the direct action of the audience participants to generate the performance through their response to various tasks, games and rules. The artistic director of CoLab Theatre, Bertie Watkins, tells The Guardian's Matthew Caines that CoLab's tales are told 'by putting people in the middle of stories and giving them the option to actively or passively watch as the story comes alive around them'(Watkins in The Guardian, 2014).

Immersive performance is the reconsideration of a variety of cultural practices such as dinning out as presented by the London-based immersive food pioneers Gingerline [include note 1]). The approaches employed here are polyphonic and drawn from disparate practices. Immersion is employed in order for both instigator and participant to work together to generate a new liminal space in which an alternative reality is engaged. Essentially, immersive performance provides a liminal space in which to create, imagine and try out; a safe environment in which to indulge in the act of 'shallow play', free from the usual constraints that culture presents in life praxis and thereby free from weighty consequences.

The play is generated by the facilitators and participants and is, for this reason, fragile. It requires everyone in the game to uphold the fiction and maintain the ruse of the game. I participated in a Zombie experience at a derelict shopping mall in Reading in 2015, where we were given an explicit procedure to follow if we wished to stop. We were also instructed

to only employ this strategy if there were incidents or accidents that put safety at risk. The fragility of the construct of the play within these pregnant scenarios hinges on disruption or abandonment of one or more participants. The fictive nature of the generated play means that the consequences of acts committed during the play scenario have implications within that fictive scenario. However, these implications do not extend into the 'real world', precisely because the acts – and their consequences – can be abandoned. If 'real world' consequences emerge during the play, the fiction could be dissolved by the emergence of weighty consequences.

Micro-performance is a term that I am employing in order to make distinct work that has grown out of the live art one-on-one performance trend of the last ten years. This term can be seen as a slippage that sits between the site-sympathetic, experience-centric dramaturgy of immersive theatre and the reframing of the everyday of live art one-on-one encounters [include note 2]. Unlike the pregnant scenarios of immersive performance, micro-performance re-frames the everyday or social rituals in order to make the offer of a liminoid invitation rather than using the every-day and games to generate a new fictive scenario.

For example, Uninvited Guests, a Bristol-based performance company, well known for such works as Love Letters Straight from Your Heart, engage small audiences in recognisable social rituals, re-framed through the lens of performance, in this case, those associated with expressions and celebrations of love: Valentine meals, radio request shows, wedding receptions, engagement parties, and dates. The work is constituted out of a pastiche of social practices and social space but it does not assume that those practices are the source of naturalised behaviours; instead it exposes them as being products of cultural and political processes. The usual conventions of the particular practices that the company members employ are made manifest in a critically reflective context. The lens of performance itself exposes and disrupts them. These practices are not similar to the 1960s' Happenings, which privileged primary (tactile, kinaesthetic, aural and gustatory) experience. Instead, they are a

consciously reflexive, constructed site of possibilities. Fluxus activity, particularly the event scores and the concerts, rather than the objects, were concerned with the phenomenon of non-art. Their purpose was to negate the processes and institutions that produce art and to create the conditions in which audiences could generate new primary experience. Allan Kaprow worked towards the same ends with his Happenings. However, this period of experimentation in the 1960s raised questions about creative ownership, and is directly genealogically related to the development of micro-performance.

Micro-performance is the blending of social and performative ritual to create a hybrid form constituted out of a radicalised playing with social and cultural schema. While immersive theatre offers its audience access to the interior of the 'play' as a mode of shallow play that locates the audience within a (syn)aesthetic role, immersive performance gives its audience the agency to generate 'play' through playing out games, tasks and rules. Micro-performance, on the other hand, reframes the everyday through engaging its audience in shallow play with the hope of generating new, radicalised primary experience. My use of the term 'radical' refers quite specifically to the ontology of liminal space and is informed by Susan Broadhurst's notion of the liminal understood as a 'marginalised space which holds the possibility of potential forms, structures, conjectures and desires' (Broadhurst 1999: 12). It is the potential of this space that is radical or charged. I am not suggesting that there is an ontological political dimension to the radical nature of the space in micro-performance but that it holds a tension which charges the space through possibility and potential.

Wish Box: **Liminoid Invitations & Liminoid Acts**

Wish Box is a micro-performance where two performers dressed as a bride and groom worked inside a 6ftx6ftx7ft wooden frame house. The third performer, dressed as a bridesmaid worked outside of the house amongst the audience. The performers in the house

worked with a microphone to read out wishes on cards and peg them to the strings that ran across the house. While one performer read the other one pegged the wishes. They swapped over between these two roles by saying “stop” and then taking up ‘the other’s’ task. During the 6 hour period the performer working outside of the house frame encouraged the audience to participate in writing wishes and sharing them. The performers in the box filled in the frame of the house over the 6 hour period by pegging the wishes until the house was complete and they were hidden inside. There were public tasks and private tasks, all based around the Western rituals of a ‘white wedding’. The public tasks consisted of: having a first dance, throwing the bouquet, cutting the cake, making a toast. The audience were encouraged to participate in these rituals as if they were ‘wedding guests’. So the audience at times were asked to dance, clap or catch the bouquet. The private tasks were completed within the house frame, such as kissing or holding each other. The performer working outside of the house frame, at arbitrary points in the performance, played ‘classic wedding reception’ songs, (requests for these were collected and compiled through social media), and they encouraged the audience to dance with the performers during these songs. In addition to this, the performer outside of the framed house encouraged the audience to document and share their experiences via social media.

Wish Box’s central dramaturgical trope is the re-framing of recognisable cultural practices through game structures in order to extend its particular liminoid invitation. The bride is dressed in a white wedding dress, the groom wears a top hat; the space is decorated with floral arrangements and balloons. The ‘top table’ is laid out with a wedding cake and white tablecloths. All aspects of the space, except the wooden house frame are indexical of a wedding reception, [Include note 3]. However, each of those elements is ‘made strange’ through their manifestation as tasks as well as through the performative frame.

It presents familiar cultural codes, which allow the participant to enter that space and negotiate it according to previous experience and knowledge; although this process is

disrupted and problematized by and through their continuing intelligent action within that space:

The content of the cognitive schemas consists of rules, beliefs, and memories that mould the flow of information into cognitive products: interpretation, predictions, and images.

(Salkovskis, 1996: 20-1)

Figure One: Liminal Performance Space View One. This image was taken during the six hour performance in May 2015.



It is the convergence of these two distinctive but recognisable sites of cultural practice that produces the liminality of this particular micro-performance.

Figure Two: Liminal Performance Space View Two. This image taken during the six hour performance in May 2015.



The wedding reception is subjugated to the critical frame of performance. Each recognisable ritual activity of the social construct of the wedding is exposed as constructed by performance; this offers the participants the possibility to transgress or transcend those

rituals through the radicalised space of the performance. At an actual wedding reception the guests express their hopes and wishes for the Bride and Groom's future but in Wish Box the invitation is to express one's own wishes.

The construction of the performance's hybrid spaces relies on the audience's cognitive architecture, in the form of shared schema to recognise the explicit and implicit facets of the spaces; the use of familiar codes and conventions, albeit fragmented and provisional, relies on the ways in which the mind/brain receives and processes information in order to draw attention to that process (and to disrupt it). The new hybrid social space is reliant upon the participants' recognition of the disparate elements that constitute the space, familiar enough to create a sense of comfort but disrupted enough to create a liminal space that sits between the two associated architectures at play in the construction of the space. It is this hybrid liminality that enables the possibility of extending a liminoid invitation because it provides a relatively consequence-free environment for shallow play and ultimately transformative liminoid acts.

Wishes such as those shared by the audience in May 2015: 'I wish that I could have my life all over again, I would make really different choices', 'I wish that I could rule the UK, I would sort out this mess' or 'I wish that I could see you one last time, there are so many things that I would say to you', reframe and reimagine the 'real-world' context of the participants. The participants can here reconsider their own context as well as imagine other possible worlds. The radical transformative potential is inherent in (the hoped for) performativity of the wish. It is the gaming structures of the liminal space that activate this potential performativity. The hybrid site of the performance provides the context through which the constitutive social schemas are made strange and through which they can be re-constituted.

Figure Three: Joanna Bucknall & Lee Maynard reading wishes



Figure Four: Joanna Bucknall & Lee Maynard pegging Wishes



The invitation for the audience to share their wishes is made both explicit and implicit during the performance event. The audience are explicitly offered the chance to share their wishes through the invitation of the performers working outside of the house frame but when the performance becomes busier this direct invitation is not always made to all of the guests as they enter. However, the space itself implicitly elicits the guest's participation in the sharing of the wishes through its material construction: it is littered with pens and blank wish cards; the house frame contains all of the wishes generated from the previous performances, other participants are often seen writing out wishes and sharing them as new guests enter.

The spaces of micro-performance are familiar enough but the form and structure of the performance and the hybridisation of the space between life praxis and performative codes, re-configure the spaces in such a way as to render a complete comprehension through a single schema problematic at best:

'To understand the world, a person attempts to "match" what he [or she] is experiencing to past incidents stored in memory; in other words, he [or she] searches until he [she] has found a schema that summon as or categorises one or more similar stimulus configurations in the past. This "matching" process requires analogical reasoning, since every stimulus configuration has unique features'.

(Larson, 1985: 52)

Figure Five: Wish Box cards



Generating wishes, reading and pegging them creates the performer's presence and that of the participants while also performing radicalised possibilities through the actual content of the wishes.

'I wish that I knew what had happened to you because I still to this day harbour some hope that you will come back to me'.

'I wish that people saw me for me and not just my disability'

'I wish that I knew how to make you happy'

'I wish that women had always run the world, there would not have been so much war and devastation'

'I wish that humans had tails...

[illegible]

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Notes

1 <http://www.gingerline.co.uk/>

2 It is worth noting that again this practice has been popularised by work produced in the venue Battersea Arts Centre, (BAC), through two high profile one-on-one festival events including artists such as Adrian Howells. These took place in 2011 and 2013.

3 See <http://verticalexchange.wix.com/wishbox#!home/mainPage> for further information and documentation of the PaR project.